

The Witch
A novella by Jonny Bolduc

I found the two dead, newborn goats in a corner of the barn. Black and brown, tiny, the size of puppies, twins. The mother looked at me like she always did; huge marble eyes dilated, sideways, like they were about to bulge out of her skull.

My farmhouse, a farmhouse that used to be ours, was down a small hill from the paddock, a half acre fenced off with a barn built at the crest of the hill. I could see it from the small wooden slat in the stall door. The baby goats were born bad. It wasn't their fault. It was November, and even with a heated blanket and the insulation of the hay, the cold air wrapped around them, slowly fading.

Even in April, the normal birthing season, on the cusp of spring, it was normal to lose a few babies. November seemed to take farm life with greed. Earlier in the month, a fisher cat had chewed through the wire of the coop and slaughtered 13 turkeys, leaving decapitated bodies piled up against the doors of the coop.

Half of life is keeping wolves from the door, I thought as I bent over to cradle the dead goats in my arms. *And the wolves are drawn to the scent of blood.*

And there was no shortage of wolves, or blood. The whole farm reeked of pain. At first, everything was coated in a thick film of memory. Even the pots and the pans, the coffee maker. The pang of "that was once ours." The knowledge that she touched this mug, cupped it in her palms, let the steam rise into the chilly morning air, leaving the floating scent of coffee lifting through the house.

I snapped back to the dead goats in my arms, limp, limbs flapping around awkwardly, the mother staring at me.

It's hard to figure out what a goat knows. Did she want a snack of grain? Most definitely. Did she miss her babies? Maybe. Sometimes, they seem like bleating animatronics, only interested in food, screaming, and breaking shit. Other times they stare at you, long tongues lopsided, eyes sideways, looking at something beyond you, understanding what exists beyond what's here.

The witch taught me how to feel that connection. That communion. Not the evil, biblical pentagram shit. But a link to something beyond. Once you know it's present, you can feel it.

Animals are a vessel. And it's not a dark energy they draw from, a dark message from an abyssal place. It's just another place, another place we go when we're done being here. Most of the time, it works out fine.

The witch also taught me that everything can be perverted, can take on a new form, a terrible form.

I met the witch in a parking lot. Her Outback wouldn't start. I offered to jump it. It was a cold February evening, already dark at 3:30 p.m. She popped her hood as I attached the cables to the terminal and turned my car on, hers jumping alive as she detached the wires.

I saw her illuminated in the headlights. She was blond, hair falling, unkempt, long to her back, flakes of snow and freeze embedded in her scalp. She was shivering.

"Thank you. I've been waiting for almost an hour," she said.

"Not a problem," I said, closing the hood of my car. "Happy to help."

She got in. Her old junker jostled to a start, and she drove off into the night.

I'd like to say that it was love at first sight, that I knew she was a witch, that I felt her presence and knew that she was going to gradually teach me that I was fundamentally wrong about the universe, about the way things worked, about life and love and joy and terror.

But as I drove out of the Walmart parking lot, the sky was just the sky, the cold was just cold, and the emptiness of a half lived life swam around me.

Days, as they often do, turned into weeks. We kept circling each other. Sometimes I noticed her, sometimes she noticed me; at least three or four times a week. In gas stations, waiting rooms, checkout lines. It became a bit of a joke shared by two near strangers; we were always together, by complete accident.

It was a hot July day, and I was at the town beach, lying on a towel. I had been reading a book, but I closed it, and laid it on top of my eyes so the beating of the sun wouldn't blind me.

I could feel my skin tightening into a sunburn, so I sat up. Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw her.

“Again?” I said, smiling.

“Yep. looks like it,” she said, grinning.

“I’m starting to think you’re following me,” I said, making a half-baked joke.

Her grin faded. She was wearing dark sunglasses and a sunhat, so I couldn’t really make out her face, but I got the immediate sense that she was very, very serious.

“I’m not,” she half whispered. “Are you following me?”

“Uh...no,” I said, unsure of what to say. I couldn’t tell if I had spooked her, if I had crossed the line from an extremely coincidental almost-stranger to a full blown, call the police stalker.

Awkward terror crept into me, and I wanted to run. I was tempted to get up and leave, and maybe move out of this spot somewhere far away, where I couldn’t be taken for an accidental creeper.

“I didn’t think so,” she said, easing a little bit. “What’s your name?”

“Jonny,” I said. “What’s yours?”

She didn’t answer. Her voice fell to a whisper.

“That boy is going to drown,” she said, pointing out, towards a floating dock.
“Things are about to fall into place.”

Six or seven children were standing in the corner of the floating dock, trying to sink it. They did; and the other half of the dock rose into the air.

A boy who looked to be about ten was standing on a particularly pitched part of the float. As it rose sharply, he slipped, smashed his face off of the wood, and, before his friends could catch him, slipped off into the water.

Before I knew what I was doing, I was in the water, running, as fast as I could; diving into the water, stroke after stroke, kids screaming, parents from the beach yelling, jumping in behind me; but I was first, I was swimming quickly and I was

at the dock, and I dived under, opened my eyes, stinging, I couldn't see anything, just a chain attached to the slimey underneath of the dock to the bottom of the lake; breath running out, I followed the chain to the rocky bottom; he wasn't there either; I looked back up, and saw him, face down, stuck under the dock; I pushed from the bottom upwards, running out of breath—

I grabbed the boy's limp body, and dragged him out from under the dock with a final push before I inhaled a lung full of lakewater. I felt the fire hit my lungs, I pushed his body up above the surface of the water and some hands grabbed him and while I wheezed and coughed—

I heard screaming from the shore; 'oh god, he's not breathing' no, I thought, I just saved him, just grabbed him, I should have saved him, and I thrashed as I lost strength and before I lost consciousness I felt hands grab me and pull me—

Everything happened fast. Everything should have been fine. EMTs were having lunch at the hotdog stand up the road; they heard the screaming and came on the scene while I was underwater. The boy was under the dock for just under a minute. The guy who jumped in right behind me was a lifeguard. The guy swimming behind him was a former Navy S.E.A.L.

On that hot July day, everything lined up. We should have been able to save that boy—I'd learn later, from his mother, that his name was Jacoby—and he should have been the one, blue lipped, shivering, on the back of the ambulance, having his vitals monitored, coughing up water.

It wasn't fair. The calculation was wrong. It should have never played out like this. A 24 year-old man was alive and a ten-year-old boy was dead. I would have done anything to switch places with him.

While I was unconscious, I had a dream. The EMT said I was out for three minutes, still breathing. The dream could have been my mind responding to the influx of trauma and the lack of oxygen and the exhaustion.

The boy was up to his ankles in the water, looking out towards the empty shore of the beach, spare the witch on her purple lawn chair. I was out on the floating dock.

The boy was sobbing. The witch rose from her chair, and slowly walked to the boy, embraced him, and reached out to put a hand on his head.

“Where’s my mom?” the boy asked, sniffing.

“She’s not here now, but you can visit her later. Why don’t we go take a walk? There are some people up by the hot-dog stand who would love to see you, Jacoby.”

“Oh...okay,” the boy said. He took a step out onto the beach, before he threw himself around, and stared at me.

I felt my chest tighten as his eyes fixed on me and I felt the way his smashed face felt when it hit the dock and scraped against the wood and how his head pounded and he slipped and the way he tried to swim up before he lost consciousness and the way the water filled his lungs—

“Who is that?” the boy said, eyes widening with fear. I wanted to say who I was, that I was a friend, that I tried to help— but I couldn’t, and I realized, with horror, that I was witnessing something that I shouldn’t—

“Jacoby,” the witch said, sternly, motherly, “You need to turn toward me. Please. You don’t have to be afraid. He is a friend.”

Jacoby, still turned to me, began to writhe, skin crawling, energy bursting out of him; light coming from his skin, from his head; blinded by the heat radiating from his formlessness, I felt myself burn into him, felt my consciousness blend into his—for a moment—I had to stand—had to stop this—I saw the writhing and the fear, the red open sore of the sky, the dark hue of the beach suddenly vast and endless, a void, drawing me and the boy in like a magnet, like we were being pulled; I had to stand up, do something, anything. I stood up.

The pulling stopped. Jacoby was sobbing again.

“WHO ARE YOU?” he screamed.

“I’m a friend, bud.” I said, “I saw you under the dock and I tried to help you out—”

“Oh. That was you?” Jacoby asked me, the sobbing easing.

“Yeah, it was,” said the witch. “Now I need you to get out of the water, Jacoby.”

“I don’t know if I can,” he said, his skin beginning again to jump up and down like a flame.

“You can,” she said. “You can, Jacoby.”

Jacoby turned to me.

“I’ll get out if he jumps in.”

For the first time, the witch turned to me directly.

“Friend,” she said carefully, like she was choosing each word with care. “You don’t have to jump.”

“Yes, he does!” said Jacoby, with the petulance of a ten year old. “I won’t do it if he doesn’t!”

I looked down at the water. It was black, oily, bubbling.

I glanced back at Jacoby. I didn’t know what was going to happen to him if I didn’t jump. But the fear in my chest told me he would be lost, swallowed up by whatever this oily water was.

I looked at Jacoby.

“Alright,” I said, “On the count of three.”

One.

Two.

Three.

I jumped into the water.

I woke up in the ambulance, stretched out on a table. A paramedic hovered over me. I asked if Jacoby was dead.

“Woah, take it easy,” the EMT said. “Who’s Jacoby?”

“The kid,” I said, “underwater. Jacoby.”

No one in the back of the ambulance responded. After a few seconds, the EMT asked,

“His parents said they didn’t know you. How do you know his name?”

I didn’t say anything. I looked toward the beach. The witch was gone.

A few days passed. Jacoby’s family called me a few times, told me it wasn’t my fault, that I was a hero for trying to save him. They asked me to come to his funeral. I couldn’t.

I could barely leave my apartment. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Jacoby. Or the black, oily water.

And in my dreams, I was standing on the edge of the dock, staring at the bubbling void and Jacoby’s blue bloated bloody face rose up from the depths and he was sobbing, asking me why I didn’t swim faster, why I couldn’t save him.

When I drank, I fell asleep and I didn’t have dreams. So I took to drinking. Hard. One day, I was driving to work, an open bottle of whiskey barely concealed under a coat in the passenger’s seat. The car in front of me stopped suddenly. I tried to break, but ended up smashing into the back of a Subaru.

I got out of the car, stumbled. A few people came out of their cars and started coming over. I didn’t even wonder if the other driver was ok; I was more concerned about my breath. The cops would know. I couldn’t go to—

The Witch got out of the car.

I stopped. A small crowd was gathering, cell-phones out, on the phone.

“It’s...you..” I whispered.

“Yeah.” she said. This time, I could see her eyes. Bloodshot, like she had been crying. I could smell her breath. She’d been drinking as well.

“Jacoby..” I muttered.

“He’s fine. He made it.” she said, staring at me, ignoring the woman who was asking us if we were alright—

“Then why...”

“The dreams,” she said, nodding. “It’s because you jumped.”

“I had to jump,” I said, not noticing the blues flashing behind me, the cops getting out, coming toward us.

“Yeah, you did,” she said, a lopsided, drunken smile. “They’re going to arrest us both, Jonny. But...after we sober up...we need to talk.”

The Witch was right. We both got arrested. My coat fell off the bottle during the force of the crash. I glanced at it. It was almost empty. I did a quick calculation; I had been drinking heavy for six months. I didn’t even notice when the bottle was gone.

The bottle was the first thing the cop saw. I saw him put on some gloves. Another cop car rolled in.

“You’ve been drinking sir?” It wasn’t really a question.

I shouldn’t have said anything. Should have waited for my lawyer. But I just wanted to get it over with.

The other cop glanced into the Witch’s car, muttered, “Jesus,” and asked the Witch if she had been drinking. She said she had.

“Do you two know each other?”

“No,” we said, almost at the exact same time. The first lie we had told.

We both blew the same blood alcohol level. Way over. We were both cuffed and put in the back of the same cop car, and I think we decided, subconsciously, that it wasn't a good place to talk. We rolled away in silence, silence cut by the sudden burst of radio chatter.

As I was carted off to jail, I leaned my head back, and closed my eyes. For the first time in six months, I didn't see Jacoby. I glanced over at the Witch. She was asleep.

I knew she was as tired as I was. She had the same dreams.

When we got to the jail, we were separated. I spent a night in County, sobered up, and posted bail. First time. No convictions. Not even a speeding ticket. \$500, only bail condition not to drink.

I knew I'd probably be back. I already knew I needed a drink. I should have called a lawyer first thing. Called my parents to tell them I'd got into trouble and probably lost my job and needed help and I was so sorry— But I didn't. The first thing I did—and I mean the first thing—was to try and find the Witch.

I tried going back in and asking the intake guards if she had been released.

They told me to fuck off.

I didn't know her name. My possessions were still in a clear plastic bag. An uncharged phone, a lighter, a wallet with \$14 in cash.

There was a Cafe down the street. I got a coffee, and sat. The morning's paper was on the stand.

"Shit," I muttered. "We're probably in there."

Sure enough, I flipped to the local section of the paper, greeted by my mugshot, and the witches'. Headline "Two arrested after drunk drivers slam into each other."

I never told her that I learned her name from her mugshot. I left my coffee on the table, and left the cafe without paying for the paper.

It was a two hour walk back to my apartment, but I made it. I charged my phone. About 100 voicemails and missed calls, from my mom, my dad, my sister. My work. I was fired. I scrolled through.

A number I didn't recognize.

It was the Witch.

"Hey, I found your number in the phone book...I found your address, too. I'm coming over."

"What?" I said out loud, to no one. She hung up. I tried calling her back. Went right to voicemail.

She didn't even knock.

Everything in my apartment was carpeted; even the bathroom. The kitchen was tight, narrow, with piles of pizza boxes and booze bottles and grime towering like a pyramid. I had long accepted that I would never get a cent of my damage deposit back.

A narrow hall, then the "living" room that was a futon pad on the floor and a tv with a Playstation hooked up. After, my bedroom. A mattress on the floor, piles of clothes.

"You still hungover?" she said, smiling at me. I flicked on the light, cleared a pizza box off a chair.

"I'm sorry it's such a mess."

"That's ok. My apartment is too."

I sat across the table from her. For a good stretch, both of us were silent, but not awkwardly. It was like we were both tired, like we both had come back from the brink of whatever the hell had happened to us and we were finally sitting down, gasping for breath, not drowning, happy to be safe.

"What was that?" I finally asked. "What happened on the beach?"

She put her head in her hands, slumped down.

“Uh, yeah, see, it’s hard to explain. And I guess it wasn’t so much of a ‘what was that’ as it was a ‘where were we,’ ” she said.

She looked at me. She wasn’t smiling anymore. Her eyes were still red, baggy; she looked like she hadn’t slept in weeks, and she could tell that I wasn’t following.

“Jacoby...he was dead, right?” I asked, slowly.

The Witch nodded.

“So we were dead too? Did I die when--”

“No,” the Witch snapped, cutting me off. “No, we weren’t dead. Jacoby was dead. We were alive.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I just thought--”

The Witch hunched over again and cut me off, a bit more gently this time.

“Jonny. I’ve been...going to that place...for a long, long time. As long as I can remember. And I’ve never had anyone else come with me,” she said. “Usually, it’s easy. I offer a hand, tell them everything is going to be fine, and we walk. Sometimes, things get fucked up. The...bad thing comes.”

I knew better than to interrupt her, though my mind was going wild with questions. She paused, again, and went to the fridge. She took out the beer. With a sense of purpose and direction I attributed to clairvoyance, she went into my drawer and grabbed a bottle opener without hesitation.

“Usually, when things get as bad as they did with Jacoby, I can’t save them. I...I try the best I can. But you...you saved him. You jumped in the water. I’ve never seen anyone do that before.”

I had to interrupt.

“Sorry, what? What did I do? How did I save him?”

“He wasn’t going to go. He was going to get claimed by that...black shit, the oil,” she said, shortly. “You helped him go beyond. I want to see if you can do it again. But I need you to promise me something.”

I stared at her. Even though she hadn’t cleaned up since jail, and her hair was frizzy and greasy and she still reeked of booze, I would have followed her anywhere.

“Anything,” I whispered.

“You have to trust me. Please trust me.”

I nodded. She smiled.

“Come with me.”

She finished the entire beer in three gulps and bounded out of the door. Of course, I followed.

I followed her from my apartment to the corner, and from the corner to a bar; a place I had been a few times called the Blue Goose, a one-room bar where you stood shoulder to shoulder and your shoes always stuck to the floor if you stood in one place for too long.

We stood across the street, staring at the bar.

“Someone is going to come out of that bar. They’re going to trip on the sidewalk, and when they fall, they’re going to get hit by a car.”

“Can we stop it from happening?” I asked, reminded of what she had said before Jacoby drowned.

“No,” she said. “I wish. Let me do the talking.”

Sure enough, a man, probably in his late sixties, stumbled out of the bar, the bouncer behind him.

“Go sleep it off, Charlie,” the bouncer called to the man.

The man wobbled, tried to catch himself, then fell, face planting onto the street from the curb. As the bouncer screamed, a car raced over Charlie's body with a thud like the driver ran over a trash bag, limbs caught in the wheels, bones snapping off like twigs.

Parts of the man spilled out onto the road, crushed open like a smashed jack-o-lantern and the witch grabbed my hand. Suddenly, the road was empty.

The streetlights illuminated the man, sober, unharmed.

"What..happened?" the man said, looking down at his hands.

The witch crossed the street. I followed.

"I'm sorry, Charlie," she said. Charlie turned and looked at her for the first time.

"Who are you? Who's he?" he said, pointing at me.

The witch cut me off before I could answer.

"A friend. I'm here to help you, Charlie. There's a few people waiting for you around the corner."

"Who?" he asked.

"Nancy," said the Witch.

Charlie seemed to crumble to the ground, sobbing. I was scared. When Jacoby started crying, he almost imploded. Was Charlie going to do the same? Was the bad thing going to come? But the witch didn't seem like she was scared at all.

"I know. You miss her. She'd love to see you, Charlie. But we have to go. We can't stay here."

"Why?" asked Charlie.

"Because it's not safe."

"Oh...okay," he said, rising. He took a step towards the Witch.

I glanced up the street. And I saw headlights, a sick, green color, and they hit Charlie, and Charlie started to convulse, and Charlie started to scream, and from Charlie's skin burst a sickening light, tendrils of black smoke burst out of him; the car was getting closer; the Witch leapt out of the way, but Charlie didn't move, he just stood in the street; I pushed him, and he flailed up onto the curb as the whizzing of a passing car almost brushed up against my back.

The witch was panting. Charlie seemed whole again. I felt fine.

We walked around the corner with him, and Charlie finally went home. When we came back,

The witch was holding my hand.

She smiled at me.

She slept over on the couch that night. With her there, even in the other room, I could sleep soundly. In the morning, I took her to get some coffee.

"So, where do you live?" I asked as she gripped her mug and pressed it into her palm.

"Nowhere. I got kicked out of my apartment after I was arrested," she said.

I knew it was crazy, inviting someone I had just rear ended in a drunken bender to live with me. But I felt like I knew her. Like we had already met, that some deep part of me had studied her before, like she had spoken to me and I had listened.

"Do you want to move in?" I asked, quietly.

She smiled. "Sure."

The witch moved in with me. We cleaned the place up. We went to court, lost our licenses for six months, and managed to get a job at a Subway around the corner. My parents helped us out with rent until I got a job at a newspaper and we managed to be happy.

The first time we kissed, it was a few days before Christmas. We had been semi-platonic up until that point, and I had gotten pretty good at helping people die. I learned how to exit death if things were getting bad, how to sense if the bad thing was coming.

We were watching the Grinch. Not the Jim Carrey one, the old school cartoon. She found it romantic, I guess. She leaned into me.

Our first kiss was on the pullout couch she slept on, and after that, she slept in the bedroom with me. The next morning, I got up before her and made eggs. She came into the kitchen, got a running start, and jumped on my back. I spun around, shifting her, and kissed her again, her long blond hair falling into my face. She grabbed my hand.

And for a year and a half, she never let go. We were happy. Together.

And we kept going to the other place. We kept saving people, walking with them. Someone would die. We would be there. We would help them along.

One night, the witch was working, I fell asleep on the couch. In my dreams, I was transported. I was back on the beach.

Jacoby wasn't there. I knew something was wrong. The dead can come in dreams, and they often do, and when the Witch and I would talk to each other about visits, it was almost like we were talking about old friends. Alvin was doing fine. Jen had managed to move on. Curtis was getting there. Mike was a piece of shit, but he was slowly learning how to not be an asshole.

But the dreams followed a format. The dead were there. Jacoby wasn't there.

Slowly, I turned. I looked out toward the float. I saw him out there. He was standing on the corner, trying to sink it.

"NO!" I screamed. Jacoby was going to lose his balance. He was going to fall in. I had to save him--when he was drowning under the dock, I couldn't but I had to. I stepped into the black oily water. It burned my skin, like I was stepping into low, blue coals.

"Jonny." I didn't turn around. I knew it was her. "Don't. You can't save him."

“You said he was okay,” I whispered, trying to keep Jacoby from hearing how desperate I was, how badly I wanted to save him. “He’s not okay. He’s going to fall in.”

“Please, turn around,” she said, her voice quivering, on the verge of tears. “You can’t-”

I dove into the black. The last thing I heard was the witch scream my name. I tried to swim out to him, out to the float, but the black sludge latched onto me, coated me, and became solid, and I sunk down into the vast oily void.

I woke up, gasping. I needed a fucking drink. I slid off the couch, over to the pantry, where I had stashed some vodka. I thought about grabbing a shot glass, but ended up pouring half the bottle into a pint glass.

I felt heavy, like the gunk had latched onto my soul. I was back in the days after Jacoby died, back to thinking that if I drank I could get rid of the stain of not being able to save him.

But this was different. This time, I couldn’t save Jacoby’s soul.

Reality snarled at me, bit me in the face. I was a drunk. I had a criminal record. I was broke, in way over my head. And who was she, this woman I was obsessing over, the woman who I called the witch?

I had the distinct feeling that I was being drawn into something that I couldn’t quite understand. I was fucking with people’s souls. Something deeper than myself, something far, far more important than me.

I didn’t want to be drawn into anything. All I wanted to do was drink myself to death. The stakes were incredible, and I knew that I was utterly unable to deal with whatever the hell happened again if it happened again.

So I went to the fridge and took a chilled bottle of rum from the door. I took a paper bag from the counter, put the rum inside, and left my apartment with the intention of finally fucking dying.

I wandered the dark streets. Must have been three or four in the morning.

Lewiston, Maine is an old factory town, mills empty; a town rooted in the whirling mechanics of the past, where the fog stopped rolling and the factories shut down.

A bridge connects Lewiston and Auburn. I had blacked out and subsequently come to. I was on a bridge.

The jump might not have killed me, but the river, in the winter, was fierce, overflowing; rapid. If I jumped, it could be over. Whatever happened to me, whatever I almost did to Jacoby, would never happen again.

I climbed up onto the guardrail. Blues flashed, police coming up to me. It was now. It had to be now.

A soft voice from behind me.

“Turn around.”

I didn’t. As I stepped over the railing, I passed out.

They pumped my stomach and they stabilized me. While I slept, I was back at the beach, this time, on the shore. I looked down at myself, and I was coated with tarry oil; I couldn’t breathe, my lips were sealed shut by the glob, sticking to my skin, and I failed, trying to gasp, mouth sealed shut; and I couldn’t see through the oil that had solidified on my eyes, I was buried alive, standing up, and I was flailing, and I was going to die—

I felt myself scrubbed away. I felt the tar removed, but by bit, first from the mouth, so I could breathe, the eyes, so I could see, and finally, I stood whole and clean.

Someone was scrubbing my back. I turned around. It was the Witch.

“Why didn’t you turn around.” she asked, her eyes dancing with fury. “You said you would trust me.”

“Sorry,” I said, looking down at my feet. “I..I couldn’t. Whatever happened to Jacoby was my fault. I shouldn’t have been there...”

“No,” the Witch said simply. “Look at me.”

I gazed up at her.

“It’s not your fault. But you have to listen to me. Please,” the Witch said.

“I only have so much to give, and tonight, you took most of it. When you see me, I’m going to be weak. I’m not going to be myself. But you have to trust me.”

“I...I always trust--”

“No,” she said, her eyes glowing red with fury. “If you trusted me, you would have turned around. Whatever that thing was on the dock, it wasn’t Jacoby. It wanted you to dive in, and you fell right into it.”

“I’m sorry...”

Her eyes seared with anger. Her brow creased. She looked concerned.

“I don’t forgive you, not yet,” she said, her voice cracking. “I... I...can’t carry this weight on my own. Anyone can be ruined, Jonny. You can’t be the one who ruins me.”

I woke up in a hospital bed, surrounded by family, with an incredible guilt. And not because I had just tried to kill myself.

But because I had hurt the one who had tried to save me. The one who wanted me to be ok. I could almost feel the witch, almost feel how that oil had set into her, how I put that heavy stone on her chest.

I spent a day in bed at the hospital. They put me on some sedatives. The next day, they sent me to a psych-ward.

The latched doors shut behind me. I was locked in. The nurse, a mousy woman, gave me a tour. We walked past a room with an open door. I absentmindedly looked inside of it. I saw the witch. I stopped. The nurse didn’t notice, and kept speaking to me as if I was behind her as she hurried down the hall, toward my room.

I stared at her. In her gown, it looked like she hadn't washed for days. Her long hair was filthy, ends frayed, and she stared off into the distance. She looked at me, but her eyes danced off somewhere else.

And, for a moment, they went black, like someone had dipped her irises in oil.

The nurses wouldn't let me in her room. I couldn't talk to her. I spent a lot of my time sleeping, trying to reach out to the witch, trying to meet her again.

But I didn't know how. There had to be a ritual, some way to get to that place, the beach, the inbetween, as she called it. But every time we went to that place, she touched me. And I couldn't get near her. She spent most of her time locked in her room.

Days turned into weeks. I kept sleeping.

The ward was a secure floor, the rooms consisting of two beds, a desk, and a locker. My roommate was named Joe. For the first few weeks, he was detoxing, so he was in bed almost as much as I was.

When it was meal time, we gathered in the hallway, where we all lined up while the food cart rolled in and we were served, one by one. Most everyone in the ward were detoxing, or alcoholics, or had OD'd, and it wasn't like insane people in straightjackets. Everyone was quiet.

We got our food and went into the kitchen, where they had us sign out forks and knives so no one could try to kill themselves in the bathroom.

There wasn't much talking. We were all hungover, scared, or in withdrawal. Until the stranger came in.

He was a short man, greasy hair long to his back, a pencil-thin mustache and long fingernails. He shuffled his feet, and had his mouth half open, in a complete daze. He took a spot in the back of the line. A woman who had just been admitted came from her room and stood behind him.

He flung around, flailing his arms, hitting the woman in the face;

“Don't FUCKING TOUCH ME YOU FUCKING CUN-”

And suddenly, the quiet kitchen erupted. The nurse who was signing out the spoons, a friendly, short guy named Roland, launched himself between the two. Roland grabbed the man by the shoulders, throwing him off the woman, who had taken a few steps backwards, her face bleeding.

Five nurses came out of nowhere, and helped Roland take the guy by the shoulders to the isolation room. When I was first admitted to the ward, the nurse said that was the place where “patients went when they were acting up.” Well, fuck, that asshole sure was acting up.

I woke up in the morning to screaming. I ran out into the hallway; I had slept in, and I was feeling thirsty, lips parched, late for the morning meds. The screaming was coming from the TV room. I ran to it, almost slid on the linoleum, almost crashed into the empty food cart.

The asshole had shut himself in the tv room, leaned a chair underneath the handle so it couldn't open from the outside. The nurses were banging at the door and the patients were lining the hallway; the door to the ward flung open and five security guards poured in and pushed us back away from the door to the room.

Suddenly, I was alone. The door to the tv room was open. I walked inside.

The asshole had a blooded woman beside him, butter knife held up to her throat, sawing at it while she screamed and tried to buck him off as the dull blade made her skin raw and cut at her—

“Hey!” I half shouted. “It’s over. Put the knife down.”

The asshole dropped the knife, and kicked the woman to the side, yellow teeth opening up to a wide grin.

‘It’s not over,” he said, taking a step toward me, “It’s not over, we’re just getting warmed up, you fucking idiot!”

There were no security guards in death. I wished there were.

He pivoted on his feet, and, getting a running start, launched himself and the woman, bearing down on her, kicking her face and I heard cracking of bones and blood spattered on the white wall and I launched myself at him to try and get him off of her—

I touched him on the shoulder, and it was like I had put my hand into a vat of acid; it burned, and ate at me, and I screamed, and my hand was covered in that greasy black. And the woman coughed up liquid and convulsed and I knew there was nothing I could do; nothing I could do to get the asshole to stop, to tell her that she would be okay and lead her around the corner and watch her go off into death.

The man shot off black tendrils of fog, and the woman began to convulse like she was going to explode, and the tendrils of black came from his open mouth and latched onto the back of the battered woman's skull, flesh open and broke and cracked apart; and as the arms latched off of the asshole and into her, she started to lift up, her body convulsing with light, light absorbed by the black oil;

I couldn't watch. I had to stop him; I was going to jump on him, fling him off of the woman--

But I didn't. I made the mistake before, jumping in, trying to save, making things worse. This was my chance. I shut the door and sprinted into the witch's open door.

She was lying face-up in the bed. I came close, and saw her face. Hardened chunks of black coated her; sealed her mouth shut; she looked like a burned corpse, black ash piled on her, like paper mache layer after paper mache layer.

I heard his footsteps in the hallway.

“Where'd ya go? Where'd ya go? To save your fucking whore of a girlfriend? I fucked her already. I'm gunna fuck ya both! Gunna rip you apart! Gunna make you watch her--”

I grabbed the chair from her desk and put it up against the door. I figured I bought myself a few minutes; the asshole fiddled with the door, trying to force it open, but I guess that trick worked for me as well. He couldn't open it.

Slowly, layer by burning layer. I took the void from her face, piece by piece, inch by inch. Every time, I felt some weight added to me, piling up, and I knew that this

wasn't something that could go away, just be transferred; I brought this crushing void to us, and it belonged to me. I could see her face. I uncovered her mouth first, and she slowly started to breathe. I uncovered her eyes, and they flicked open at once, though I could tell she wasn't home.

When she looked like she was coming alive, I led her into the bathroom, where I washed her hair in the sink, and she looked at me, and I saw that she was there, and though I could feel the oil swimming inside of me, feel that terror in my heart, I was alive again.

I would never let that happen to her again. I looked at the door. The asshole had his face pressed up against the glass window that looked into the room; he unhinged his jaw, teeth filed down and grinning, rows and rows and rows, skin dancing up like an oil flame, radiating dread and terror from his form.

I held the witch in my arms. I lost her as death faded back into life. I was in the hallway again, absently staring as 12 officers led the man from the room and paramedics rushed in to try and save a woman who was already dead and had already been claimed.

They let the witch out of her room. She started to recover. I started playing along, doing the work, taking the meds, completing the worksheets and the therapies. Mostly saying what I thought they wanted to hear.

The witch kept a distance. When she did look at me, she glanced at me, like she was ashamed, like she was the one who had fucked up royally. I knew she needed to be apart, I knew she needed to recover. I was feeling tired as well. Peeling away the black from her still weighed on me. I knew it always would.

A day later, a doctor in a flannel, in his 60's, white hair, dressed casually, took me into his office. He said he was working on my discharge.

His office was scholarly, surprisingly comfortable, more like a stereotypical British study than a room at an inner-city psych-ward. He was soft spoken, kind.

"You seem like a smart guy," he said. "Are the meds working?"

I couldn't even tell I was on them. They had absolutely no effect. But I lied.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Do you think you’re ready to leave?”

“Yeah,” I said, again.

“What’s your support system at home? What’s your discharge plan?”

“I’m probably going to move in with my parents,” I said.

A day later, I was in a minivan, my silent dad driving, my mom in the passenger's seat, smiling faintly. It was raining.

“It’s good to have you home,” my mom said.

And, for a while at least, it was good to be home. The witch gnawed at me. I missed her.

Sometimes, when I rose at night, alone, I’d think she was there, trick myself into thinking I saw her shadow move in the hallways. I’d say something out loud to her and expect her to respond I’d look in the passenger’s seat and realize that she wasn’t sitting next to me and I’d slam my fists on the dash, scream and pull over.

Then, the dreams started.

The woman, alone in the TV room of the ward, watching Love It or List It intently.

“You know, he stole my soul, right?” she asked, quietly.

“Yeah. I’m sorr-”

“No,” she said, calmly, interrupting. “Don’t. You don’t get to say you’re sorry. You could have tried.”

Slowly, like an owl, her head twisting towards me but her neck unmoving, cracking, bone splintered neck severed she twisted herself to stare at me as oil poured out of her eyes and the black void emanated from the gaping maw of her mouth and I woke up screaming.

This went on for a few months. The terrible nightmares, waking up in a cold sweat, continuing on with my cookie-cutter day like everything was fine. I got promoted, saved up enough money to move out again. I started looking for dying.

The witch taught me some rituals. To find a death, the mind had to be clear, and the guide, the map was a copper pendulum, kept in a pocket, as close to the core of the body heat as possible, smudged with sage and oils, used to ask the there beyond there what soul would soon need help to leave the earth.

I lit the room with sage and placed my forearm fully on the table. I called upon the higher to clear my mind, and the path came; the pendulum swung back and forth. In the mind came the location, a farm, and the time, 3 p.m., and the name.

When the name came, the world crashed, the pendulum stopped, and for the first time, I dropped it; it hit the table and rolled to the floor; and I leapt up from the table, mind racing.

The Witch was going to die.

I tried her old cell phone. It was disconnected. I ran outside, to the car, and fled as fast as I could, to the farm, out in the country, about 40 minutes away.

The ritual was never wrong. The ritual was never wrong, but how could the Witch die? I had left her to protect her, to keep her from the slog of me, that followed me wherever I went. It was noon. She had three hours left on earth.

Fast, pushing 80. Made the 45 minute trip in 30; everything seemed like it was blurred down into moments, each second seemed like something vital was being chipped away. One of her first lessons she taught me after Jacoby was that you couldn't change death. It came. If the bell was rung, if the process began, it could not be stopped without a life slipping from earth.

I pulled into her driveway, skidded to a halt, kicking up dust from the gravel. I flung the car door open, kicked open her slanted gate and ran up the path, towards the white farmhouse.

She was waiting for me on the screened-in porch.

"Hi," she said.

I stopped. I stammered.

"You're—do you know you're going to die..."

"Yes," she said.

I felt like my eyes were going to bulge out of my head, like my brain was on fire and she was there and she was going to die and what could I do—

She grabbed me, embraced me, and I felt all of that melt away, at once, without thinking.

She didn't need to speak. Leading me through her dimly lit kitchen, illuminated by candles, into her living room, she sat on the sofa, sat me down, and traced her fingers across my face, tracing my features, pushing back my hair; I did the same, studying her.

Death isn't so bad. The hardest part is the forgetting, the forgetting of the voice, of the features of the face, the way the eyes dance and the way the skin reflects in the sun; the way the numbing of the days passed leaves the leftover, the one on earth with just an abstract thought of the tangible, living person.

She got up, and I was afraid to follow. But I did. I followed her outside, through her yard cluttered with scraps of wood and a rusted out grill and followed her to the back paddock, where her goats stood on the slight incline leading up to the barn, bleating loudly at us.

She turned to me.

"Close your eyes."

I did. A gunshot. Shallow breathing, gurgling, breath forced like her lungs were full of pebbles; lying in a pool of blood. Gone. Just her and I. She stood up where the goats had grazed a few seconds before.

"Come," she said, soft.

I unlatched the gate. And walked towards her.

"I'm ready. But I don't think you're ready to walk with me."

I wasn't. I could never be. I fell to my knees again, tears leaking—how could I say goodbye? There was no way to do it; always, I'd be wanting one more touch, one more glimpse of her face; one more conversation. It would never be enough. There could be no light to fill the void.

"The terror isn't here. We don't have to worry about it. I prepared this for you. It's beautiful, isn't it?"

And like she was switching a light, the sky turned pre-sunset, orange twilight jutting out from behind purple clouds, brilliant swathes, paint brush strokes; a cool breeze, refreshing, like a thunderstorm was rolling in from the corner of the sky.

"Thank you. It's wonderful."

"I've lived for about a thousand years, Jonny. I've had many lives with many different people. I've loved many. I love you. But we all have to take the long walk. You know that. And there are still many people left in the world that you can help, but you need to promise me something."

She turned to me.

"Of course," I whispered.

"Promise me that you will help. For as long as you live."

I nodded. I took her hand. We walked.